



National Collaborative of Women's History Sites Annual Meeting  
Closing Session  
Speaker: Regional Director Marie Rust  
October 25, 2003

## Promoting Civic Dialogue

Thank you, Heather, for joining me as the moderator for this closing session. I have truly enjoyed today. Together we have explored preserving and presenting history nationwide and discussed innovative funding strategies, dealing with controversial issues, marketing, and an important research project. Promoting Civic Dialogue serves as our wrap up. But, what I would like to talk to you about is a bit broader than Civic Dialogue and that is Civic Engagement.

### **Christopher Gates, president of the National Civic League, in a recent essay wrote the following:**

"Museums are vital institutions for preserving memory, sustaining culture, and creating identity. This trinity – memory, culture, and identity – is essential...to the development of individuals, communities, and societies. By providing the means to preserve memory, sustain culture, and create identity, museums help equip us to understand each other and ourselves."

The National Park System is also a vital institution for preserving memory, sustaining culture and creating identity. As Northeast Regional Director, I continually struggle with how well the National Park Service is doing in these areas. To do our jobs better, we have embarked on a new effort which museums around the country have already embraced.

In fact the American Association of Museums has helped us get the effort off the ground. This effort is known as Civic Engagement and is supported by recommendations issued by our prominent citizen's advisory board.

### **In their 2001 report, the National Park System Advisory Board stated:**

"As a nation, we protect our heritage to ensure a more complete understanding of the forces that shape our lives and future. National parks are key institutions created for that purpose, chapters in the ever-expanding story of America.... By caring for the parks and conveying the park ethic, we care for ourselves and act on behalf of the future. The larger purpose of this mission is to build a citizenry that is committed to conserving its heritage and its home on earth."

As a public agency whose mission is preservation and interpretation of natural and cultural heritage, the National Park Service is, by definition, in the business of "civic engagement". We engage the public in our mission through the public planning process, in interpretive and education programming, and directly in the preservation of significant resources and the "values" they represent.

Unfortunately, some segments of society don't relate to our parks. To make our parks relevant to everyone, we have to look at the full context of our areas. For example, I believe that every historic site is a women's history site—it's only a matter of degree. I know that some sites still claim "no women here", but that simply isn't true. It's a question of looking and of uncovering the "untold story" so that every citizen can relate their experience to our parks.

Civic Engagement is nothing new, but rather a refocusing of current efforts at partnering with communities, expanding our education agenda, telling the “untold stories”, and working with communities and partners to preserve sites that represent the fullness of the American experience.

Civic Engagement ties these diverse efforts together into a coherent whole, a way of operating, of viewing the world. In short, our activities today in bringing together citizens who are very concerned about the future of women’s history sites is a fine example of Civic Engagement.

Civic Engagement is about recognizing, supporting and further developing ethical behavior that values the fullness and complexity of the natural and cultural resources of implicit value to Americans.

One of my favorite examples of Civic Engagement in action can be found at Women’s Rights National Historical Park. If you haven’t been to Seneca Falls, I hope that you go soon. In brief the park commemorates women’s struggle for equal rights and includes the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel, the site of the first Women’s Rights Convention in 1848, the Elizabeth Cady Stanton home, the M’Clintock House, where the Declaration of Sentiments was written, and other sites related to notable early women’s rights activists. The park has a downtown visitor center. The exhibits give the historical context for the women’s rights movement in the U.S. before 1861, and trace four topical areas from 1848 to the present: access to work and wages, health/self-image/beauty, education, and activism.

The interactive nature of the exhibits promotes civic dialogue beautifully. For example, the time line exhibit illustrates U.S. history from 1776 to the present, with women’s contributions included in the timeline. The exhibit also explores the question “What Will It Be Like When Men and Women Are Truly Equal?” with a bulletin board, where visitors post their visions and can extend their vision of the timeline into the future.

Another exhibit allows the visitor to judge for themselves. [The exhibit] called “You Be the Judge” asks visitors to decide cases that had wide effects on women’s legal status and compares the actual decision to the visitor’s decision. “Viewpoints” stations solicit visitor input on a range of current issues, including discrimination in funding medical research toward male diseases, benefits of same sex educational facilities, sexual harassment, etc. At no point does the interactive agree with the visitor. These exhibits are very effective as they truly invite our visitors to enter into the debate and examine their personal biases and opinions very carefully. Both men and women alike enjoy this educational activity. Just as men and women attended the convention, today men, women, young and old visit the park. Engaging our visitors in dialogue provides them with the opportunity to experience the park on their own terms.

By providing our visitors with fully engaging experiences, parks become much more than recreational destinations. They act as springboards for personal journeys of intellectual and cultural enrichment. As the American public is enriched by the relevance of our parks, their love for our parks will grow. Our parks and historic sites then will be sustained well into the future.

As the keeper of America’s natural and cultural heritage, the National Park Service is very concerned about the long term health of these areas. Many of them are very fragile. The terrible events of September 11, 2001, especially the loss of the World Trade Center, crystallized for me how extremely vulnerable our national landmarks are. In the aftermath, I became more and more convinced that only through the engagement of all our citizenry in the future of our areas will we ensure their survival.

That is why in December of 2001, I called together park superintendents, program managers, scholars, and representatives from several organizations to explore uses of civic engagement in the National Park Service. We were fortunate to bring people together from all over the country. Managers from Rosie the Riveter, Manzanar, Cane River Creole, Gettysburg, Brown vs. Board of Education, Lower East Side Tenement, Martin Luther King, Jr., and other diverse sites were joined by the NPS Conservation Study Institute, National Park Conservation Association, the American Association of Museums and the Federation of State Humanities Councils.

At the conclusion of the three day meeting held only a few blocks from ground zero, participants formulated a National Park Service Agenda for Civic Engagement and pledged to ensure that core Park Service activities would continue to improve through civic engagement.

### **Principal to the agenda is:**

- The protection and identification of heritage resources that exemplify the fullness of the nation's history, culture and rich diversity.
- The connection of the nation's heritage to its contemporary, environmental, social and cultural issues.
- The designation, planning, development and management of parks based on partnerships and cooperative stewardship strategies.

### **We realized that successful civic engagement would require the use of multiple approaches including:**

- Civic dialogue techniques for interpretation, education, planning, and other forms of presentation and public involvement.
- Inclusive and comprehensive park planning for engaging stakeholder groups and communities in public discussions about the management and preservation of park and heritage resources.
- Partnerships with academic institutions and other educational organizations for incorporating the multiple perspectives of current scholarship.

### **What have we done to date to implement the above?**

Our region has principally focused on educating managers. We have held workshops around the country, created a civic engagement bibliography, embarked on a national historic landmark civic engagement survey and we're in the process of creating a civic engagement website. Our intent is to provide managers with the tools to engage the community in the broader contexts of our parks' legacies.

On a national level, the Director has developed a policy statement which should be finalized soon. In addition to clarifying, coordinating, and strengthening our commitment to legally required public participation and involvement, the policy statement articulates our commitment to civic engagement, and to having all National Park Service (NPS) units and offices embrace civic engagement as the essential foundation and framework for creating plans and developing programs. Let me encourage you to take a look at that policy statement which is available on the National Park Service web site.

Clearly, parks serve as important centers for democracy and as places to learn and reflect about American identity and the responsibilities of citizenship. Understanding how historic sites work in a democracy is fundamental to civic engagement. Our challenge is to ensure that historic sites will help everyone understand who we are and where we've come from as a people.

Through civic engagement we also envision the enhancement of major NPS activities. Heritage resources are identified and protected that exemplify the fullness of the nation's history and culture and its rich diversity. Interpretation, curriculum based education, and other public programming connect the nation's heritage and contemporary social and cultural issues.

Civic engagement also means more inclusive, comprehensive park planning and public consultation. It's very important to involve all groups and communities in park and heritage resources management and preservation. We must also ensure consistent NPS involvement in community and regional planning and issues relevant to the protection of significant heritage resources. Another key is to solidify partnerships with academic institutions and other educational organizations to ensure current scholarship and multiple perspectives.

If we are going to be successful, we must know what we have to offer and invite the public to participate and experience it. National parks, and the special places overseen by a range of other public, private, and not-for-profit managers, can together be seen as networks that protect our Nation's heritage of both nature and culture, and provide needed recreational opportunities. Parks and museums contribute greatly to the quality of life on which our individual and collective health and well-being depend. These places and their partners provide context and meaning to our lives as citizens. Together, they instill a sense of the complexity of our history and heritage, an appreciation for our democracy, stimulate pride in our country, and strengthen our connections to the natural world and human history.

To achieve any of these things, we have to seek out the public we intend to serve, including those who may not have been traditionally involved. "Public involvement" is the right idea, but not always practiced consistently with the right expectations. We need to go beyond traditional public involvement to realize the exciting possibilities. We all know that two heads are better than one. We need to make sure we actively engage the community, our neighbors and communities of interest as we develop our plans and programs.

Civic engagement is a philosophy that seeks to ensure that the operation, planning and presentation of a park resource is truly collaborative – with every concern and option (or good idea) considered.

That is easily said, but hard to do. Civic Engagement means we must expand civic understanding and responsibility by building long-term reciprocal relationships with a broad range of interests and by fostering a widespread investment in stewardship of the Nation's special resources.

A remarkable network of public and private open spaces already exists in this country. Tens of thousands of citizens, non-profit groups, city, state, and regional entities, federal agencies, businesses, museum boards, land trusts and park and forest districts are working in partnership in a variety of forums to provide inspiration and connections to the American identity and spirit.

Our National Park Service managers must still manage according to the mandates set by the people through Congress and the President. They must take responsibility for decisions and actions and they cannot bend to every notion that seems popular – but they must also listen and hear what people need and want. The only way to value what people are thinking is to seek and consider their ideas and their advice BEFORE making key decisions.

Providing opportunities for civic discussion of the American experience in national parks is important to keeping the parks and historic places relevant to the public. Only by managing the resources in a manner that leaves them unimpaired and ensuring their relevance to the American people will we be able to sustain these special places into the future.

Now, in closing, I would like to hear from those of you who have committed your areas to programs of civic engagement and the challenges that you've met in implementing those programs. Heather, would you start the discussion?